

Molina's skid row crusade



Article by Jack Leonard

The 2005 death of an infant weeks after he was examined by social workers at a skid row mission hit hard for Supervisor Gloria Molina, who had taken a personal interest in the plight of skid row children. Her actions since have prompted sweeping changes in the ways social workers deal with homeless children.

The supervisor used a baby's homicide as a rallying cry to toughen L.A. County's stand on homeless parents. But is poverty a crime?

By Jack Leonard and Richard Winton, Los Angeles Times Staff Writers
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Los Angeles county social workers said 3-month-old Mikeal Wah-hab looked well-fed, healthy and safe when they examined him at a skid row mission.

His father had brought him to the shelter, saying that his wife had abandoned them and taken their belongings. The man appeared eager and able to care for his son.

So after interviewing him, workers drove the father and child to Monterey Park and dropped them off at a cheap motel that had a contract to temporarily house the homeless.

Nearly three weeks later, concerned that the baby's father had stopped signing the daily guest book, a hotel maintenance man used a passkey to push open the door to Room 226. On the bed in the empty room lay baby Mikeal, covered with a beige blanket. The infant's body had started to decompose.

Mikeal's death -- ruled a homicide by coroner's officials -- drew no publicity when it occurred in November 2005. But it hit hard in the office of Supervisor Gloria Molina.

In the previous year, Molina had made the plight of skid row children a personal crusade and she had persuaded the board to send teams of social workers to find families who needed help. Now this, a dead baby.

She suspected the county was at least partially responsible for Mikeal's death. She demanded to know how social workers had failed to see signs of danger. For months, she grilled county managers about

what went wrong.

The more Molina learned, the more galvanized she became.

"Here was a poor child who had nothing and yet had an opportunity to live and we were at its crossroads," Molina said. "We failed this child."

She used the death as a rallying cry within county offices. Her campaigning led to sweeping changes in the way social workers deal with homeless children, including a revamped squad of officials who work skid row.

In a government noted for its rigid chain of command, she intervened personally with social workers to lay out what she expected from them. And when new rules for the workers were drawn up, she offered to teach them herself.

Now, she is pressing sheriff's detectives and prosecutors to redouble their efforts to solve Mikeal's killing. "At every single level, in order to bring justice to this child, there has to be . . . accountability," she said.

Mikeal's mother, Tanya Stepney, had grown up in Seattle and became pregnant at 15. She had three more children in quick succession. She became addicted to crack cocaine.

Despite a worsening addiction, Stepney continued having children. Washington state's social workers stepped in as newborn after newborn tested positive for cocaine. By the time Mikeal was born, at least 10 of Stepney's children had been removed from her care.

Stepney met Mikeal's father, Mikeal Abdul Wah-hab Sr., about 2001. The California native had spent long periods of his life behind bars, serving time for grand theft, drug possession for sale and robbery.

Over the years, he was prescribed medication commonly used to treat mood disorders and had a history of hearing voices and having psychotic episodes, according to a law enforcement source who spoke on condition of anonymity because he did not have permission to talk about the case.

Stepney's mother, Linda Stepney, recalled Wah-hab knocking on her apartment door one day looking for her daughter. Linda said Wah-hab grabbed her daughter. Linda shouted at him to stop. Wah-hab whirled around.

"He hit me so hard that my face was shaking and my head was ringing," Linda said. Wah-hab dragged her daughter out of the building, she said.

Stepney's next phone call home was from California. In December 2002, she gave birth in Los Angeles to a baby boy, her and Wah-hab's first child together.

The newborn tested positive for cocaine, triggering an investigation by the county's Department of Children and Family Services. County social workers removed the baby and flew him to Washington state to live with one of Stepney's sisters.

Stepney and Wah-hab spent the next 2 1/2 years bouncing between jail, temporary lodging and the streets. Stepney was caught selling cocaine; Wah-hab did a short jail stint for burglary.

The couple briefly rented a home in Lynwood but left after the landlord filed a restraining order charging that Wah-hab had drawn a knife and threatened to kill him. At other times, they spent nights in homeless shelters.

Then came their second son, Mikeal, born at Providence Holy Cross Medical Center in Mission Hills.

Nearly 12 weeks later, on Nov. 1, 2005, Wah-hab carried the baby into the Midnight Mission on skid row.

A supervisor for nearly 20 years, Molina has long had firsthand experience of the squalor on skid row, a small portion of which is in her district.

The county is responsible for a variety of services for the homeless, such as providing hotel vouchers and handing out welfare checks, and the crime-plagued streets are a few blocks from the county's headquarters on Temple Street. They are even closer to the garment district, where Molina -- an avid quilter -- often hunts for bargains on fabric.

By 2004, more than 800 children were living in the area's hotels and missions, researchers found.

Molina said she noticed mothers clutching their children or sitting slumped on the curb.

Sometimes, Molina said in an interview, elected officials distance themselves from festering problems. "But children? Vulnerable children. I mean there's just no way to separate yourself," she said.

Her county staffers said Molina frequently drove through the area to look for new families and would ask aides to call the Department of Children and Family Services to inquire about the children she had seen.

"She'd come back and say, I saw a woman with a stroller and a child, what's going on?" said Miguel Santana, her former chief of staff. "She internalizes these issues. It kept her up at night, literally."

The issue of protecting homeless children was a natural fit for the Democratic supervisor, who is well-known for her liberal politics. But it also appealed to a less well-recognized side of Molina, who complains about "derelicts" living on skid row and discusses such issues as graffiti, gang warfare or homelessness in terms of individual responsibility.

"Skid row is not a livable condition for any human being, let alone a child. And we have many irresponsible parents who, for whatever reason, live on the streets," Molina said. "It's our responsibility to take care of those children."

Molina's strident belief that skid row is no place for a child has sometimes placed her at odds with those who provide services for the homeless in the area and alienated some of her colleagues on the Board of Supervisors.

Nevertheless, in December 2004, Molina persuaded the board to declare a "zero tolerance" for families living on skid row.

Several months later, a team of workers led by the county's welfare agency tackled the problem, trying to get homeless families off skid row by lining up welfare and housing benefits. The county team also pledged to assess whether children were safe or should be detained for their own welfare.

But there were problems from the start.

Child welfare agencies are legally barred from investigating a case unless there is an allegation of abuse or neglect or a reason to believe a child is in danger; being homeless is not reason enough.

As a result, the skid row team's child welfare workers thought they could not ask a parent about possible mental illness or drug use or check their computer databases to see whether a parent had a history of child abuse or neglect, according to a report by the county's Office of Independent Review.

It was against this backdrop that the team encountered baby Mikeal and his father at the Midnight Mission.

The news of Mikeal's death "had a huge impact," on Molina, Santana said. "She was pretty devastated by it. She was angry that somehow the county had allowed it to happen."

Supervisors usually delegate the details of county business to their large staffs of deputies -- leaving it up to them to deal with individual departments. But Molina, known for her blunt grilling of county executives, took a leading role in calling county officials to task for Mikeal's death during meetings in her eight-floor office.

"It was uncomfortable," said Lisa Nunez, who at the time attended the meetings as the chief deputy for the county's welfare department. "There were times when it was every day. She'd call people in. . . . She was deeply involved."

Molina recounted one exchange in which officials reacted defensively when she accused social workers of failing to assess whether Mikeal was in danger.

"One of the things they said is, 'Well, they did do an assessment,' " Molina recalled. "And I said, 'Just tell me what it is.' 'Well he held the child very tenderly.' "And I'm going, 'Gorillas do that!' "

The county's Office of Independent Review did not find fault with any individual county worker but detailed a series of problems and missteps in its report.

The skid row team's mental health worker, who was trained to identify signs of mental illness, was absent the day Mikeal and his father arrived at the mission. Social workers did not check whether the father -- or mother -- had a record of child abuse or neglect. And no one from the county checked on the father and child at the hotel.

Molina responded by urging a tougher approach toward parents on skid row. Every child deserved a full risk assessment, she said. If abuse or neglect was found, children should be removed for their own safety. Otherwise, the goal should be to get families out of skid row within 24 hours. Then someone from the county should check on them.

Some homeless advocates said the proposal amounted to criminalizing poverty. Parents, they argued, came to skid row because they could not afford to pay the rent. They needed help, not the threat of losing their children to the state. They said the tactics proposed by Molina might deter homeless families from coming to skid row to find shelter and services.

Molina bristled at the criticism. She said she knows about poverty, having grown up in the working-class city of Pico Rivera, the eldest daughter of a laborer who had 10 children.

"There were times when we were very poor, but I never had a moment that my father or my mom were not responsible for my well-being," Molina said. "It isn't a matter of poverty, it's a matter of responsibility."

Before the board voted, Molina made one last plea to her colleagues: "We could have saved the life of Mikeal," she said.

Molina prevailed. When child welfare agency officials said it would take months to find the staff to conduct the necessary training, Molina said she volunteered to perform it the next week. The agency quickly found alternative trainers, she said.

Last year, the county's skid row team helped more than 200 homeless families find emergency housing. Fifteen children were detained as a result of the team's work.

As Molina and the county's social services agencies responded to Mikeal's death, sheriff's homicide detectives investigated the killing.

Coroner's officials concluded that the baby died of blunt injury to the head, caused by impact or shaking.

As months went by, Molina heard nothing more about the investigation. But last year, the death of a 7-week-old girl at another skid row mission propelled her to act.

Police suspected the baby girl had died of starvation and arrested her mother on suspicion of murder. But prosecutors initially declined to file criminal charges until an autopsy was completed, and the woman was released.

Outraged, Molina called Dist. Atty. Steve Cooley. Molina recalled Cooley reassuring her that justice would be carried out.

"You didn't do it on this guy," Molina said she shot back, referring to Mikeal's father.

Cooley followed up with a letter to Molina, saying Mikeal's case had never been referred to his office but that a top prosecutor had called sheriff's investigators to ask about it.

"Due to the number of people who had access to him before his death, detectives have not determined the person responsible for the baby's homicide," Cooley wrote.

In response to questions from The Times, detectives declined to discuss details about the case but said they are focusing on Wah-hab as a suspect.

Since Mikeal's death, his father has continued to flit between jail and the streets.

In December 2005, a month after his son's death, Wah-hab was accused of threatening to kill a fast-food worker in South Los Angeles. Facing prosecution for making criminal threats, he pleaded no contest to burglary in exchange for a two-year prison sentence. He was released last year. Interviewed at the South Los Angeles gas station where he pumps gas and cleans windshields for tips, he denied having anything to do with his son's death.

The day after Mikeal's body was discovered, his mother was arrested for possessing crack cocaine and sentenced to three years in prison. She was released in April.

By September, Stepney was pregnant again and living in a Catholic home in Lynwood for unwed mothers. She left in November and could not be reached for this story.

Molina continues to have her staff phone sheriff's investigators for progress reports.

"I don't think that anyone wants to be reminded on a regular basis about the poor death of this child and how it happened," Molina said. "I don't mind reminding them that blunt-force head trauma killed him. I sometimes need to say it that harshly to remind people."

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